

Do We Still Plot Murders? Who Will Believe We Don't?

By FRANK CHURCH

Did the CIA conspire to murder Miguel d'Escoto, Nicaragua's foreign minister? Was there a plot to kill him, slowly and untraceably, with a bottle of poisoned brandy?

Yes, claims Lenin Cerna, Nicaragua's state security chief, at an elaborately orchestrated press conference in Managua, where such paraphernalia as code books, wooden-idol bookends with secret compartments, and a bottle of lethally laced liquor were exhibited in evidence. The poison, it was alleged, would have caused D'Escoto to lose his hair and eyebrows, possibly become sterile and then die.

"Clearly preposterous," retorts U.S. Ambassador Anthony C. E. Quainton, who refused to dignify the ugly accusation with a protracted denial. Who would believe such a bizarre story anyway?

Well, to begin with, nearly everyone in Nicaragua. And, in all likelihood, most of the people south of our border. They are apt to believe any murder charge laid on us, however clumsy or contrived. Tragically, we have earned a reputation as a country that will use such malignant methods even against small, weak neighbors. It is the cross that we bear for the CIA's past involvement in plots to assassinate Latin leaders.

It is not forgotten that, from 1960 to 1965, the CIA instigated at least eight plots to murder Fidel Castro, one of which progressed to the point where we sent poison pills to Cuba and dispatched underworld figures to commit the crime. The assassination devices that we considered using ran the gamut from high-powered rifles to poisoned pills, pens and cigars, deadly bacterial powders and even a contaminated diving suit!

Nor is it forgotten that these CIA conspiracies—once described by President Lyndon B. Johnson as "Murder Inc."—extended well beyond Cuba. In April, 1961, the agency placed carbines in the hands of dissidents in the Dominican Republic, knowing that they intended to kill Rafael Trujillo, the country's right-wing dictator. At least one of the weapons was in the possession of the assassins when Trujillo was gunned down.

Nine years later the CIA went at it again in Chile. This time the victim was Gen.

Rene Schneider, commander of the Chilean army, a constitutionalist who opposed an American-fomented military overthrow of the elected government. In this case the agency delivered three submachine guns and ammunition to Chilean officers who were preparing to kidnap the general. It was thus established that the CIA intended to facilitate his forcible removal even though Schneider was actually killed by another group of abductors as he drew his handgun in self-defense.

Of course these misdeeds, which so plainly contradict our professed principles, were perpetrated under deep cover. But no secret can be kept for long in a free society such as ours. It was only a question of time, as our cloak-and-dagger advocates should have realized, before a tenacious press would uncover and reveal the sordid facts.

The political price that we then pay is heavy indeed. It is measured by the credibility that the latest self-serving Nicaraguan charges will have throughout Latin America, by the extent to which Third World countries have come to regard the United States as an imperialist power, and by the skepticism with which so many American citizens now view the pronouncements of their own government.

Since the Reagan Administration has brought back the old obsessions of the Cold War, and covert action is again being touted as a tough, realistic necessity, we should remind ourselves that this antiseptic term is a semantic disguise for unacknowledged proxy wars, for murder, coercion, blackmail, bribery, the spreading of lies and any other dirty trick that is deemed useful in serving U.S. interests abroad.

In the dark alleys of covert action, where the CIA eagerly adopts the tactics of the KGB, we seem determined to fulfill the prophecy of George Hunston Williams, the eminent theologian, who once warned, "Be cautious when you choose your enemy, for you will grow more like him."

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